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# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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### **A Sense of Joy**

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Philippeans 1:1-11

If there were a competition to decide which is the most beautiful of Paul's letters, the odds would be strongly on Philippians. In no other letter does Paul share his inner spiritual life so freely. In no other letter does he express his affection for his readers so plainly. In no other letter is Paul so filled with joy.

In fact, "joy" is the dominant word in this short epistle. It appears in one form or another a total of 16 times. Paul has "joy, joy, joy, joy down in his heart," as the old campfire song goes, which is utterly amazing. It's amazing, because this joyful apostle writes from jail.

Where exactly is this jail? We're not sure. Some think Rome; others say Ephesus. No one knows for sure; but, it is clear Paul is in prison. He's in prison, yet the letter is an ode to joy. As Paul writes, he does not know whether he will be released or executed; still, he writes about joy. 16 times he writes about joy! How can this be? Just what is it that occasions Paul's joy?

Paul found joy in prayer (1:4); joy in the proclamation of Christ, even by his enemies (1:18); joy in the knowledge that his prison experience and trial would honor Christ and aid in his own ultimate salvation (1:19-20); joy in the thought that his death might have a sacrificial significance for the Philippians (2:17); joy in the hoped-for steadfastness and unity of his converts (4:1; 2:2); and joy in the Philippians' gift that had been sent to him (4:10). And he wanted the Philippians to have joy—joy in the progress of their faith (1:25); joy in the possibility of his sacrificial death for their sake (2:18); joy in their renewed

fellowship with Epaphroditus (2:28-30); joy in the fact of their incorporation in Christ and the church (“rejoice in the Lord” – 3:1; 4:4); and joy in the hope of Christ’s coming (4.5).

Joy in jail? Perhaps the reason I’m so surprised is that I often confuse joy with happiness. Happiness turns up where you’d expect it—a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it.

Maybe that helps explain how a friend of mine experienced the recent death of her mother as an occasion of immense sadness mingled, inexplicably, with joy. At first the paradox puzzled (and even embarrassed) her. Joy seemed utterly inappropriate under the circumstances. But she could not deny the mix of emotion, and the longer she lived its truth, the clearer it became. Certainly there was grief in the loss, but there was also a flood of gratitude and joy for her mother’s life and love.

A Presbyterian theologian wrote of the same experience in his reflection on the death years ago of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador: “Days later, I found out the assassin’s bullet went through his heart just as he was finishing the words of institution of the Eucharist. ‘This is my body broken for you.... This is my blood...shed for you.’ I felt a strange sense of joy.”

What makes joy different from happiness or pleasure or fun is that those things are all conditional. All of those things depend on positive conditions—good health, great job, happy family, neat toys. The only condition for joy is the presence of God. Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means that it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, or in an intensive-care waiting room.

Do you remember the movie *Chariots of Fire*? It is the true story of two British runners competing in the 1924 Olympics. Eric Liddell (played by Ian Charleson) is a devout Christian and one of the finest runners in the world. Eric’s sister, Jennie (played by Cheryl Campbell), wants him to leave competitive running to join the family on the mission field in China. Jennie thinks Eric is putting running ahead of serving God, and she questions his commitment.

In one scene, Eric attempts to help his sister see his point of view. Eric announces with a smile, “I’ve decided I’m going back to China. The missionary service has accepted ....”

Jennie interrupts him. “Oh, Eric, I’m so pleased.”

Eric continues, “But I’ve got a lot of running to do first. Jennie, you’ve got to understand. I believe God made me for a purpose - for China. He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt. You were right it was not just fun. To win is to honor him. Eric Liddell found joy in honoring God.

Several years ago at another church, I was part of a week-long mission trip to Juarez, Mexico. Juarez is a border town just across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. Someone once said, “There are first-world countries, second-world countries and third-world countries. Then, there are the Mexican border towns.” The poverty is beyond telling. Thousands live in cardboard boxes covered by corrugated tin roofs. Dust hangs in the air in a perpetual cloud. At one point when our group was visiting an open-air market, a man approached me and asked if I would pay to have sex with his 12-year-old daughter. The conditions were unimaginable. To this day my stomach turns in knots just thinking about it.

But do you know what my most endearing memory of that week is? The joy of worship in the church

which hosted us. The church was named, “Verdad Y Luz” – the church of Truth and Light. People worshipped there as if their lives depended on it—and perhaps they did. The joy was overpowering and contagious.

Who can be joyful living in a place where babies starve and parents force their children into prostitution and a piece of corrugated tin is called a house? It’s hard to get “jump-up-and-down” joyful in a place like that. But that was exactly the spirit of their worship: jump-up-and-down joyful.

Let me say it again. The only condition for joy is the presence of God. Joy happens when God is present and people know it; whether you are Eric Liddell or a poor Mexican in Juarez. Joy can erupt in a small cinder block church called “Verdad Y Luz” or in a grand air-conditioned Ralph Adams Cram cathedral called Westminster Presbyterian Church.

When C. S. Lewis titled his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, many hoped he would say something fresh about this key Christian virtue. He did. Lewis said that joy surprises. It comes unbidden and unplanned. It cannot be commandeered, coerced or even gently cajoled into existence. Like the Spirit, it blows where it wills and on its own timetable.

Lewis tells us of his first experience with joy. He was a child of five or so when his brother, Warnie, made a little toy garden of twigs and flowers in the lid of a biscuit tin. The sight enchanted Lewis, and he fell under its spell. It was for Lewis the first beauty he ever knew and it would be the way he would always think of paradise. It created in him a deep longing for something unattainable, but intensely desirable.

From that point onward, Lewis had recurrent glimpses of the joy he experienced as a little boy and which visited him unannounced after long stretches of absence. In adulthood Lewis recognized that the longing that occasionally overwhelmed him at odd, unpredictable moments, was the restlessness that Augustine knew could be satisfied only by God. It was Augustine who said, “Our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in Thee.”

For Lewis, joy was found in the desire to be with God. In another of his books he writes this: “Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered to us. We are like an ignorant child who wants to go on making pies in a slum because we cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

A new car, a hole-in-one, all A’s on a report card—all of these can make you happy. On the other hand, joy doesn’t happen when we get what we want. It is much more likely to happen when we do not get what we want only to find ourselves laughing instead of crying.

Joy occurs when we realize that God’s ideas are so much better than ours. Only we have a hard time seeing that until our own wishes have crashed and burned. It is there, in that wilderness, in that empty-handed, I-give-up surrender that joy is most likely to occur. Don’t ask me why. It just does. And that is how you know God is present—because no one else knows how to make life out of death. No one else knows how to come into a dark room and turn on all the lights, surprising everyone inside with the last thing anyone ever expected: pure, inviolable joy.

Joy is a gift, not a reward. So all we can really do is want it, believe in it and oh, yes, stop doing stupid things that get in its way.